

Gaithersburg Day Laborer Task Force Meeting  
Tuesday, January 10, 2006, 7:30 p.m.  
Gallery, City Hall

I. Presentation by Ad Hoc Committee Members

Gloria Aparicio was designated by Chair Prentiss Searles to run the meeting in his absence. Ms. Aparicio thanked the members of the Ad Hoc Committee for attending the meeting and for their willingness to share their information and experiences with the task force. As the Ad Hoc Committee senior City staff person, Assistant City Manager Fred Felton provided background on the Day Laborer issue and events leading up to the Ad Hoc Committee's formation. It was noted that the overview was based on an earlier presentation given by the City Manager to the Mayor and City Council.

Mr. Felton related that in the fall of 2004 the City received a complaint in regard to individuals congregating at 117 North Frederick Avenue and subsequently Grace Church. In following up on the complaint it was discovered that individuals looking for work had been gathering at the Spanish Catholic Center. Despite the fact that the center had closed as part of an effort to consolidate its operation in Wheaton and refocus its efforts on providing medical services, the workers remained. Problems developed, particularly in regard to "nuisance behavior" exhibited by a limited number of individuals. The police tried to work with all parties to find a resolution. Subsequently, property owners agreed to allow the day laborers to stay for a limited time in the morning (from approximately 6 a.m. until 9 a.m.).

In coordinating enforcement efforts, the City and County police identified problems such as loitering and urinating in public. A group, comprised of clergy from the Grace United Methodist Church and representatives of the City and County governments, began meeting informally to address the issue. After learning about the Wheaton and Silver Spring Employment Centers, the group thought that such a center would be a reasonable solution. In researching possible sites, the Ad Hoc Committee recommended 17 North Frederick Avenue, based on its proximity to the regular gathering site of day laborers. The idea was to establish a center that would initially provide shelter and restroom facilities within a supervised setting and eventually, expand to include an educational component. It was later acknowledged that a mistake had been made in regard to not getting public input on the proposed center.

In answer to a question regarding criteria for choosing that site, it was stated that there were no specific criteria. Other sites considered included the former Craven Tire and Auto building and 615 South Frederick Avenue, a small strip shopping center off Route 355. There was concern that it might be difficult to modify the workers predilection for the existing gathering space and efforts focused on finding a site nearest the existing site.

The question was posed as to whether interviews with day laborers had been conducted to determine the areas from which they came. It was stated that an informal survey had been taken one morning. However, it was noted that only 25 workers were gathered at the time of the survey and of them only 12 individuals responded. Based on that limited response, it was determined that the majority came from the North Summit Avenue area with some individuals coming from West Deer Park and Londonderry.

In regard to the Gaithersburg site serving workers from Damascus and Germantown, it was noted that the Ad Hoc Committee was very focused on dealing with the existing Gaithersburg group and that walkability was a primary goal. Furthermore, it was stated that Casa de Maryland efforts were to be focused on the local group.

In regard to the ethnicity of the workers, it was determined that the group was predominately Hispanic with a few African-Americans workers.

Fred Felton offered to check demographic information from the Census in regard to a request to determine where in Maryland larger populations of Hispanic people reside.

Joe Heiney-Gonzalez (Office of Community Outreach, Offices of the County Executive) reported that he submitted an overview of the Ad Hoc Committee and summaries of subsequent meetings to Cindy Hines. It was noted that the information had been received and forwarded to the Ad Hoc Committee. Mr. Heiney-Gonzalez stated that the role of Montgomery County was to partner with the City of Gaithersburg and Grace United Methodist Church to aid members of the community in need of assistance. Efforts were focused on addressing the needs of county residents, mainly those from Gaithersburg that lived within a 15-minute walk of the existing gathering area. It was noted that Rev. Piel (Senior Pastor Grace United Methodist Church), Rev. Rocha (Pastor Grace United Methodist Church), and Catherine Matthews (Regional Director, Upcounty Regional Service Center) were part of the initial group dealing with:

- Identifying immediate problems
- Identifying issues to report to the police such as loitering and urinating in public
- Identifying an orderly process by which to respond to complaints

It was noted that the day laborers had asked for assistance and had acknowledged their willingness to self-police the group.

A two-fold approach was developed to identify both an interim plan and a long-term plan to address the employment issue. Montgomery County viewed the day laborer situation as a labor force issue. It was noted that the day laborers were willing to work and that many reported having families living in Gaithersburg and children enrolled in local schools. Furthermore, from the County's point of view,

the proposed Day Laborer Employment Center was part of an overall plan based on a continuum that supported a natural progression from day laborer to skilled laborer and eventually inclusion into the regular work force.

The question arose as to how CASA de Maryland acquired such a pivotal role. It was noted that after the third formal planning group, in which Pastor Piel agreed to co-chair the committee alongside one of the day laborers, CASA de Maryland was asked to submit a proposal for the employment center concept. In regard to the proposal, it was asked if any competing firms were invited to participate. It was noted that no other formal competing groups were at the table and that Casa de Maryland was the only one in Montgomery County offering the required services.

The Ad Hoc Committee was asked if any other suggestions/recommendations had come out of their meetings. It was stressed that the concept of an employment center should have other components capable of addressing social service and educational issues. Additionally, there should be some provision for partnering with the County in regard to emergency services, particularly in regard to housing and crisis services. Prior to its closing, the Spanish Catholic Center had served as an employment center, offering a range of non-profit services including computer training and job/skills training.

Lastly, the Ad Hoc Committee stressed that Gaithersburg was not alone and that the day laborer issue was being grappled with nationwide.

It was stated the task force's understanding was that the two functioning employment centers in Montgomery County also provided health referrals, educational opportunities and job referrals. Given the full-service nature of the center, a question was raised in regard to the impact the establishment of the center has had on nearby business and its affect in regard to the area's overall crime rate.

Joe Heiney-Gonzalez noted that it was difficult to respond in regard to Silver Spring as that center was established 12 – 15 years ago. However, in regard to the more recent Wheaton site, it was noted that business owners indicated that they felt safer. Joe acknowledged the responsibility that the day laborers were taking in policing themselves and, although he did not have the actual crime statistics, he noted that there had been a reduction in the number of complaints to police.

In regard to the existing day laborer site, it was asked how many workers usually gathered. Rev. Rocha stated that yesterday 55 people had gathered between 6:30 a.m. and 7:15 a.m. He indicated of those 55, 49 lived in the City of Gaithersburg, two lived in Germantown, one lived in a trailer park and three lived in Montgomery Village. Sgt. Scott Scarff noted that the number of individuals gathered is fluid and subject to change day to day and season to season.

The actual process for getting work involved workers vying for position as they converged on vehicles driven by potential employers. It was noted that supervision, associated with the temporary use of the Grace United Methodist Church, was being handled by the church.

In response to the question of whether a survey had been conducted to determine who hires the workers gathered each morning, the Ad Hoc Committee stated that they did not conduct such a survey.

The effectiveness of enforcing cutoff times was questioned. It was noted that while police are successful in clearing the Grace site, workers could congregate elsewhere. Sgt. Scarff agreed, noting that currently police act with full support of the private property owners in moving people off the property at the agreed upon time. However, if individuals move to a public location and are not involved in illegal activities or nuisance behavior there is little that can be done. Furthermore, he noted that the task force needed to understand that there was more going on than just people looking for employment and that an unsupervised environment tends to draw other individuals, possibly homeless or intoxicated individuals that view the gathering as an opportunity to socialize. He encouraged the group when studying the issue to look at the bigger picture.

It was noted that the Episcopal Church was offered as a site for the center but was rejected primarily because of traffic issues. It was noted that the South Summit/355 intersection is extremely busy. Additionally, that location would require the siting of a trailer.

In regard to the existing gathering area, Sgt. Scarff was asked his experience in regard to loitering and inappropriate behavior. He stated that the police were not seeing the crime they had in the past, which he credited to the supervision and a continuing effort on the part of the police to educate individuals on inappropriate behavior. He noted that he is not seeing arrests in regard to loitering and urinating in public. However, he stated that he is still seeking a lack of order, and that numerous individuals huddled in small groups tend to be viewed as intimidating by passersby. He also indicated that things became very competitive when potential employers pulled up.

Sgt. Scarff was asked if enforcement of day laborer gatherings is taking service away from other parts of the City. He noted that it had not diminished the department's level of service. Conversely, he stated that interacting with the day laborers has actually helped the police, particularly in regard to information provided by one day laborers that led to the arrest of an individual suspected of a homicide. Sgt. Scarff noted that the only difficulty he might have is in regard to being able to clear the site at precisely 9 a.m. if he is working another call at that time.

Kim Propeak, Director of Community Organizing and Political Action for CASA de Maryland, was asked what role CASA de Maryland played in the earlier

meetings. She stated that Executive Director Gustavo Torres had participated in the Ad Hoc Committee meetings and, having extensive experience in providing assistance, worked closely with the City and the clergy. She indicated that there were similar employment center models in other areas and that she would forward that information to Cindy Hines for distribution to the task force.

Ms. Aparicio once again, thanked the Ad Hoc Committee members for attending the meeting.

## II. Work Plan Items – Brainstorming

Ms. Aparicio presented a template to track progress on the four charges. The committee reviewed the overall design and agreed to use the format as presented. In reviewing the first item, gathering information from the Ad Hoc Committee, it was determined that that charge will be considered complete once all requested information has been received and reviewed. In regard to the second item, research of initiatives by government and/or community groups..., it was suggested that local government information be obtained from Assistant City Managers Fred Felton and Tony Tomasello. As for community groups, there was uneasiness on the part of some task force members in regard to presentations by organizations promoting their own agendas.

Rich Koch distributed a list of task force issues he drafted from the perspective of various groups. He proposed the list as a means of identifying issues that he hoped would aid in framing out work areas. The wide range of aspects included in the documents was meant to emphasize that the issue was larger in scope than just a day laborer center. Mr. Koch noted that the website was a wealth of information and cited a center in California that had posted detailed notes on its establishment and evolution.

It was suggested that Mr. Koch's list be used a starting point and that it be reviewed at the next meeting and pared down to include only issues specific to Gaithersburg. Furthermore, it was suggested that additional research be done to determine how other areas are dealing with day laborer issues. One member cautioned against getting caught up in the details of the day-to-day operations of running a day laborer center and urged it be viewed on a macro-level.

Although the Ad Hoc Committee put a good deal of emphasis on location, it was stressed that the charge of the task force was to identify criteria for a site and did not include selecting a location. However, it was acknowledged that certain aspects regarding location could be included in the criteria.

The task force discussed the need to identify the goals of the Ad Hoc Committee and determine which ones they would support and what they might have done differently and also the need to collect more information. It was decided that these tasks could be carried out concurrently. One task force member questioned whether the task force should provide a written statement precluding use of the facility by illegal immigrants. Another member responded by emphasizing that

the task force charges were very specific and nowhere did they address the status of immigrants and, as such, the task force had no authority to address the legal status of immigrants. Another member concurred stating that the legality issue is not something that the task force can resolve.

In preparation for next Tuesday's meeting, task force members were asked to review the information provided by the Ad Hoc Committee, to outline goals, and begin gathering research material via the internet to share with the rest of the task force.

As the meeting was drawing to a close, Assistant City Manager Tony Tomasello confirmed the following items to be included in next week's agenda:

- Discussion of possible issues resulting in identifying those relevant to Gaithersburg. This will satisfy the first charge.
- Providing a written summary of the Ad Hoc Committee presentation for inclusion in the final report to the Mayor and City Council.
- Task force working structure needs to be addressed and closed next week.

In regard to the agenda, it was noted that it needed to be modified to add sections for "Old Business" and "Approval of Meeting Summary."

On the subject of old business, it was stated that a request had been made at the last meeting for translation services to be provided at subsequent task force meetings. The board acknowledged the importance of ensuring that all parties involved would be able to understand the proceedings. However, there was some initial concern in regard the potential for hindering or distracting the board should board members and the interpreter be competing to be heard. **A motion was made requesting that the City provide a certified interpreter to translate task force meetings. The motion passed.**

A request was made that the large board detailing the four task force charges be displayed at every meeting.

### III. Task Force Working Structure

Deferred until next meeting.

### IV. Adjournment

Just prior to adjourning, it was proposed that the board consider hearing from the day laborers soon.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:20 p.m.